



State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Commission on Children



## Parents as Assets in the Community How Community Leaders Can Reap Parent Involvement

In civic affairs, parents often go unheard—not because they lack motivation or the will to change their children's lives, but because they lack advocacy skills.

Of course, parents already have their hands full, providing their children with values, nurturance, safety, and the motivation to learn. But children also need to see their parents acting in the community, having an impact on a rapidly changing world. It instills in them a lifelong belief that change is possible.

A parent who leads also shows that seeking the best for all children is not only possible but expected of everyone else in the community. This expectation reinforces in the next generation the sense that they can lead outside their homes in constructive, creative ways.

Below are some basic steps for fostering parent involvement.

### Parents will participate when they:

1. **Know it is part of something successful.** Think with parents about desired outcomes. Ensure together that the activity has a purpose with clear goals and positive outcomes for children. Do not bring parents in after an agenda is designed.
2. **See that they can make a difference in children's lives.** Ensure that the activity and tasks are reasonable and practical. Individual parents often have contacts and strengths that the group does not have. Gather and fully utilize them.
3. **Feel supported, respected and acknowledged for their time and efforts.** Parents' time is limited. Create an environment that is warm and offers dignity to every participant.
4. **Receive hands-on training and guidance.** Assess what skills are needed to accomplish agreed-upon tasks. Provide training and informal mentors, along with an explicit understanding of why and how each skill is necessary to the goal.

5. **Receive support with such things as food, child care, and transportation.** The time otherwise spent making food and taking the bus is replaced with time to interact, nurture children and create a community for a shared goal. Family-friendly supports kindle an overall group cohesion.

**Parents will stay involved when the agency:**

1. **Acknowledges efforts and inspires next steps.** Take note of success. Clearly explain whatever steps remain for reaching the stated goals. Assess the challenges together and brainstorm solutions.
2. **Develops realistic, attainable expectations and goals.** Planned steps towards a realistic goal become a clear map for all participants. When the goals change somewhat, as they might in civic activity, hold a group discussion to build awareness that change is often difficult to achieve and that strategies need constant adaptation to reach a goal.
3. **Creates a space where parents feel safe, comfortable, and valued.** Disallow token utilization of parents as an interest group. Bring out skills, critical thinking, and leadership opportunities for parents.
4. **Shows progress in parent efforts.** Note expected and unexpected assets. Highlight civic tools acquired and detail available training to further leadership skills. Highlight individual strengths and how they complement others' skills.
5. **Creates a sense of parent ownership in the change process.** Facilitate parent planning at key junctures in the change process. Guide innovative parent ideas and new contacts into strategies throughout the process. Write up parent input.

**Leadership skills for parents will prosper if the agency:**

1. **Creates an inclusive environment that does not marginalize parents.** Parents who have unusual contacts, interpretations, or ideas should be welcomed—they could be more helpful than you realize. In addition, recognize that parents who are used to helping with one-time events may not be used to providing ideas, analysis, or contacts on a sustained basis.
2. **Establishes opportunity for parents to meet civic leaders in different areas.** This helps parents realize that civic leadership is a community expectation and that community activity creates broad and unexpected opportunity.
3. **Provides training that can be easily applied to a variety of settings.** Skill building is pivotal to enduring participation of parents. Identify needed skills as well as opportunities for practicing existing ones.

4. **Establishes a peer network among the group with community contacts.** Building peer networks creates a map for broader, enduring communities of parent leaders. Peer support, both within and outside the group, offers connections that will generate ideas for children.
5. **Follows up on actions that take place outside of the group.** Parents can become disengaged if they are left hanging with no follow-up. When parents are asked to take some action for the group, ask them to report on what happened and provide their insights.
6. **Provides an environment for family sharing and listening.** Child policy is about family. Deeply personal as family life is, it must not be left at home. Sharing the joys and mishaps of everyday life as a parent creates laughter, hope, and reminders of why we are trying to improve the world for children.

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